

Mr. Nixon's First Whiff of Trouble

By JAMES RESTON

The first sign of trouble for the Nixon Administration has appeared, as usual, in the field of foreign and defense policy. In this field, the relationships of the White House, the State Department, the Defense Department, and the Senate Foreign Relations Committee are vital, and in the last few days it has been hard to ignore the beginnings of a problem for all concerned.

The questions before President Nixon now—as before Presidents Roosevelt, Truman, Eisenhower, Kennedy and Johnson since the beginning of the nation's world responsibilities—are first: how to reach common decisions in this field within the executive branch of the Government; and second, how and when to consult with the Congressional leaders, whose consent is essential to effective action.

The Human Equation

When human relations are bad within a department, as they were between Secretary of State Hull and Under Secretary Welles in the last years of President Roosevelt's long tenure; or when the leading figures at State and Defense are at odds as Dean Acheson and Louis Johnson were under President Truman, the friction within the executive hurts the President both on Capitol Hill and abroad.

Similarly, when the principal officials in the executive branch are in general agreement and sympathy with one another—as Johnson, McNamara, Rusk, and McGeorge Bundy were in

the escalation of the Vietnam war—but in disagreement with the Chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, Senator Fulbright of Arkansas, the problem of reaching a coherent policy becomes almost impossible.

The last time we had both effective unity on policy within the administration and effective consultation with the Congress was when Dean Acheson was at State, Robert Lovett was at Defense, and Arthur Vandenberg was chairman of the Foreign Relations Committee.

The Nixon System

President Nixon remembers all this very well. He knows the advantages of the paradoxical but trustful skepticism that existed in those critical days after the last war, but he is now setting up a system and dealing with a new cast of characters that will cause him endless difficulties if he is not very careful.

First, he has in Dr. Henry Kissinger of Harvard an experienced and strong-willed man who is his principal assistant on security affairs in the White House, and whose assignment it is to serve as principal staff officer to the Cabinet committee known as the National Security Council.

Second, he has a wise personal friend and trusted counselor in Secretary of State William P. Rogers, who lacks Mr. Kissinger's experience in the foreign field. And he has a powerful political figure as Secretary of Defense, Mel Laird,

whose associations with the Congress, the Joint Chiefs of Staff and the industrialists of the nation are very close.

The President, of course, has said all the right things: the Secretary of State is the first officer of the Cabinet; civilian control will prevail at the Pentagon; the Kissinger office in the basement of the White House will not be primary, but it will help advise him along with the Secretary of State, and he, the President, will decide.

Meanwhile, however, Mr. Nixon has apparently decided that the job of coordinating the interdepartmental committees on foreign and defense policy will be under the National Security Council and the guidance of Dr. Kissinger, and this has produced the first howl of protest from Chairman Fulbright.

Executive Privilege

His point is that White House officials have increasingly claimed since the last World War that they were personal staff officers of the President and therefore not subject to close questioning by members of the Congress. The Secretary of State was the coordinating officer on security questions under Presidents Kennedy and Johnson, and did not claim "executive privilege" when summoned to Capitol Hill. What will happen now? Mr. Fulbright wants to know, and judging from the tone of his voice, he is quite serious about it.

This is undoubtedly a problem that can be handled if it is recognized in time. One of the

saddest things about the Johnson Administration is that Dean Rusk and Bill Fulbright—both from the South, both Democrats, both Rhodes Scholars, both leaders for a generation in the battle for collective security and a bipartisan foreign policy—got tangled up on personal and policy questions at the very beginning of the Kennedy Administration and never once in eight long years ever sat down privately in each other's house to try to resolve their difficulties.

Preventive Action?

Accordingly, though President Nixon, Secretaries Rogers and Laird, Dr. Kissinger and Senator Fulbright are all civilized men who are eager for common discussion of their common problems, they could easily drift into their separate compartments and revive the old personal and departmental feuds of the past.

No two men could have been more different in personality than Dean Acheson and Senator Vandenberg, but they both recognized their common responsibility and their differences and set out at the beginning of their relationship to meet every few days to deal with their common problems. Thus they achieved what Rusk and Fulbright, who shared so many memories and objectives, never achieved. They solved their problems because they recognized the danger signals in time, and it will be interesting to see whether the Nixon Administration manages to do the same.